



Photo: Farrha Khan

Comedian Joel Ozborn can squeeze his body through a tennis racket and has had sling shots fired at his face, but now he's getting his act together, writes Farrha Khan.

It all came down to one moment – sneaking in, underage, to a magic show. Little did Joel Ozborn know that this experience would direct the course of his future.

“When I was 12 years old, that’s when I first saw The Amazing Jonathan, an American comedian and magician. I was blown away by it. I thought, ‘That’s what I want to do when I grow up’,” Ozborn recalls.

Now 27, Ozborn is one of Australia’s most promising comedians, touring with fellow comedian and close friend Akmal Saleh. He has also toured nationally with America’s Arj Barker.

Ozborn, who grew up in Balmain, got his first real taste of comedy after winning a year 10 public speaking competition at his alma mater, St Andrews Cathedral School. He chose to speak about the anxiety of wombats.

“All the debating people that were getting up with these proper speeches about politics and the environment were really pissed off at me at the end,” says Ozborn.

“They had prepared and were proper public speakers, and here I am just getting up there, winging it and basically doing a comedy routine. It was weird because a lot of the students came up to me afterwards going, ‘I never knew you were like that’.”

His close friend since year 6, Grant Lavac, says entertaining is in Ozborn’s blood. “He was always the character, playing the comedian, laughing at the most ridiculous and smallest things,” says Lavac.

“I was visiting Joel in Las Vegas, it was Halloween and we stood in a line for an hour to go through a ‘haunted house’. We paid a few bucks for this

lame tour and we were going along and we saw this button on the wall.

"We didn't know what it was, what it powered and Joel being Joel, flicks the switch and the lights and music died down. He turned off the power to everything! We got out of there pretty quickly and we got away with it! He's just so random."

But life for Ozborn hasn't been all laughs. He's put in the hard yards to get a solid reputation.

When Ozborn was 14, he met Akmal Saleh, who was opening for The Amazing Jonathan at the Enmore Theatre at the time, and would go along to watch Saleh at the Comedy Store. "I was underage and they would chuck me out, but Akmal knew me so he'd sneak me in through the side door," says Ozborn.

At the age of 16, Ozborn began performing a magic and comedy show in a toy shop in Balmain, every second Saturday for \$20.

He later began street performing at Circular Quay and in front of the Opera House, where he won the 1998 Street Performer Of The Year competition live on 2Day FM.

Although he "didn't want a nine to five job", Ozborn did a certificate in marketing and advertising after high school and ended up as The Amazing Jonathan's road manager, moving to the United States for four years.

"Little did I know that I'd be thrown in the deep end. It was gruelling work, with minimum sleep and a new town every week, but I was young and loving it," he says.

While living near Venice Beach, Los Angeles, Ozborn used his spare time to street perform. "Street performing at Sydney at Circular Quay is very different, it's all family and tourists. But at Venice Beach it's just crazy, literally people walking around with pythons around their necks. Tattooed bikers would come to me after the show and I'd think they were about to roll me or something," he says.

Returning to Australia in 2002, Ozborn brought his street performance indoors, becoming a regular in comedy

clubs and festivals and touring internationally including Edinburgh, the United States and South East Asia.

His routine included manoeuvring his lean 190 cm tall body through a tennis racket to the song *Rockerfeller Skank* by Fatboy Slim.

"I originally did it with a coat hanger. It was more difficult, but it wasn't as impressive because you couldn't really see it," Ozborn says.

"Everybody asks how I come up with the idea of getting through the racket, and I always say, it came to me when I was a small kid because I remember looking at my mum and thinking, well, if I can fit through that then..."

Ozborn's routine also included a sling shot being fired at his face. "I

A lot of doors will open for Joel ... anything can happen! He's got the right ingredients to get really far.

AKMAL SALEH

was reading this thing called the 'bullet-catching trick', or the 'bullet-catching effect', where a person catches a marked bullet between his teeth," he says.

"I didn't want to risk having my head shot off and I thought if I'm doing street performing in LA, pulling out a gun isn't the best idea. So I scored some sling shots! And rather than having a ball bearing I opted for having a Jelly Belly."

Since then, Ozborn's stage comedy has moved away from the street gimmicks, and he no longer feels "the pressure to dance around like a monkey".

"I'm working on the stand-up a bit more than writing it with an idea of wacky props or situations, and just revealing more of myself," he says.

But, as much as Ozborn is enjoying working on proper stages and in more controlled environments, he's had his fair share of horror stories, like a show he did on a boat in Sydney.

"They had no stage, no lighting and crappy sound system," he says. "I just wasn't happy and then I was stuck on the boat with these people for another three hours. I was trying to avoid eye contact and it was just... I just wanted to jump ship."

Content with where he is now in life and not wanting to look too far ahead into the future, Ozborn quotes John Lennon, "Life is what happens to you while you're making other plans."

But he confesses one goal: "When I get an hour-long of solid material, I'm going to be happy. I'm up to about 40 minutes at the moment and that's just straight stand up. I feel like I've done the hour before, with doing all the old street stuff. But by the end of the year, hopefully I'll get there."

This for Ozborn shouldn't be too hard, although he reveals that while he's fine with his routine, he can never remember any other "joke" jokes.

"I'm horrible! I can often remember the punch-lines or maybe the first sort of set up, but never really the in-between stuff. So when I try and retell a joke, I'm always all over the shop. I never know where I'm going. I try and fluke my way through the joke to try and get to the punch-line and hopefully not mess it up too much.

"Bit sad as a comedian not knowing any 'joke' jokes."

Ozborn is now touring with long-time friend Akmal Saleh, who shares the same sense of humour.

"We've been touring for more than two years now. We just get along really well," says Saleh.

"I mean, the other day we almost arrested a girl while we were driving. She was just being really rude and beeping the horn. So we just got out and pretended to be cops, Joel was wearing his sunglasses and I flashed my wallet. She was a 'P-plater' and was really panicked when we let her go!"

"A lot of doors will open for Joel because he's really passionate about what he does." Anything can happen!" says Saleh. "He's got the right ingredients to get really far."